

Philosophy 20A – History of Philosophy (Thales to Aristotle)

UCSB | Fall 2008

Short Paper Assignment

This short paper assignment is worth 35% of your overall course grade and must be handed into your TA at the end of class on Friday, November 21st (late papers will be penalized). Your short paper assignment is to answer ONE of the two essay prompts listed below (the choice of which one you write on is up to you) in approx. 4-5 pages (double spaced, using a reasonable font size, etc). **To get full credit it is important to answer every part of the essay prompt to the best of your ability.** Grading will be based on the accuracy, completeness, and philosophical acuity of the essay you submit (see below for some basic guidelines and pointers).

Prompt 1: The Euthyphro

In Plato's dialogue *The Euthyphro*, Euthyphro claims that he has "expert-knowledge" of piety and impiety, and as such does not fear having acted impiously in bringing his father up on charges of murder. Since Socrates claims *not* to know what piety is and appears interested to learn, he asks Euthyphro to provide an adequate definition of piety. First, briefly **present and explain** the first definition of 'piety' put forward by Euthyphro at 5d. What kind of definition is Euthyphro's first attempt? And why does Socrates reject that definition as inadequate? What kind of definition is Socrates interested in? Then, **present and explain** the second definition of 'piety' put forward by Euthyphro at 7a. Is Euthyphro's second attempt better than the first? Why does Socrates reject the second definition as inadequate? According to Socrates, what specifically went wrong this time? What condition, necessary for any adequate definition, does Socrates' think Euthyphro's proposal fails to meet? Next, **present and explain** the third definition of 'piety' put forward by Euthyphro at 9e. Is Euthyphro's third attempt better than the second? Does it meet the necessary condition that his second attempt failed to meet? Finally, **evaluate** the success of Euthyphro's third definition in terms of the question that Socrates asks him at 10a. What additional condition does Socrates seem to think is necessary for any adequate definition? According to Socrates, what specifically went wrong this time? In other words, why (specifically) does Socrates' think that Euthyphro's third proposal fails to meet this additional necessary condition? Do you think that Socrates is correct in requiring that all adequate definitions meet both of the conditions that he has suggested? Could Euthyphro have avoided Socrates refutation? State your opinion and explain why or why not.

Prompt 2: The Republic

In Book II of Plato's dialogue *The Republic*, Glaucon and Adeimantus claim to be dissatisfied with Socrates' reply to Thrasymachus' claim that *it is better to be unjust than just... for those who do injustice are happiest, while those who are just are most wretched*. As such, they attempt to strengthen Thrasymachus' case thereby re-challenging Socrates to provide a persuasive defense of his own claim that *it is always better to be just rather than unjust*. First, **present and explain** the renewed challenge put forward by Glaucon and Adeimantus. What were the details of their case? How were the details of their case supposed to strengthen the challenge posed to Socrates? Then, **present and explain** the strategy that Socrates employs in order to respond to the particular challenge put forward by Glaucon and Adeimantus. What kind of argument—generally speaking—is Socrates' using to respond to the challenge? What are the key assumptions underwriting Socrates' line of reasoning? Finally, **evaluate** Socrates' response to the challenge in terms of his proposed answers to the two 'justice questions' that we've been considering in class. What, according to Socrates, is justice (on both the civic and individual level)? And why is justice, so conceived, supposed to be something beneficial? Do you think that Socrates has done enough to demonstrate the inherent superiority of justice over injustice? State your opinion and explain why or why not.

* *Note: **presenting, explaining** and **evaluating** are all somewhat different things, and both prompts ask you to do all three things in your essay. See below for more details.*

ORIGINALITY & PLAGIARISM

Your paper must be the your own work. We're looking for you to exhibit your own *understanding of* and *engagement with* the issues, not just to regurgitate undigested bullet points from lecture or section. Students are certainly encouraged to talk to classmates about these issues, but must take care not to incorporate others' ideas without explicit acknowledgement. Students may also consult the secondary literature in order to confirm their own understanding of the material or to stimulate their own thoughts (note that the syllabus includes a list of the most useful secondary literature); however the use of such secondary literature is *not* expected or required.

Any material taken directly from another person must be placed in quotation marks, with the source explicitly cited (**when quoting directly from Plato's Dialogues, just indicate the appropriate Plato Numbers—e.g. 374a, 9d, etc**). Whenever others' ideas are used or discussed without taking material directly from their writings, the source of those ideas must be explicitly cited as well. (*Departures from this policy may amount to plagiarism.* For the policy on plagiarism, see the course syllabus.) However, your paper should *not* include a lot of quoted material anyway. Again, we want to see your own work.

SUPPORT FROM THE INSTRUCTOR AND TAs

The instructor and the TAs are very happy to meet with you to discuss your papers as you are thinking about them and putting them together (preferably during official office hours if you can make it then). We can talk about your overall strategy for the paper and the various arguments, objections, responses etc... you are considering. We can talk about the various philosophical issues that come up, work through your arguments and so on.

However, neither the instructor nor the TAs will be reading drafts. We are happy to talk about the philosophical substance of your arguments and objections, but will not to get into close editing and micro-management of your paragraphs and sentence structure. Getting these various fine-grain details right is *your* job: the assignment is partly about your showing that *you* can clearly organize and articulate your ideas.

Note also that you can get writing assistance from the CLAS writing lab: for details see <http://www.clas.ucsb.edu/>

WRITING PHILOSOPHY PAPERS – A FEW POINTERS

Presenting, Explaining and Evaluating Arguments (the basics)

To **Present** an argument (or position), do the following: (i) try identify the conclusion of the argument and formulate it in clear, literal terminology, (ii) try identify the central premises from which the conclusion is derived, and formulate them in clear, literal terminology and (iii) try write out the entire argument in numbered premise-conclusion form.

To **Explain** an argument (or position) that you have presented do the following: (i) try to define all the technical terms, concepts and assumptions that appear in (or appear to be underwriting) the argument and (ii) try to elucidate the meaning—or main point—of each of the premises in the argument.

To **Evaluate** an argument (or position) that you have presented and explained, consider “the pros and cons” of the argument. More specifically, consider (i) whether the argument is *valid* or *invalid* (in other words, does the conclusion follow from the premises? Does it have the right formal structure... such that **IF** the premises are true, then the conclusion will also be true) and (ii) whether the argument is *sound* or *unsound* (in other words, are the premises true or at least plausible? Are there any good reasons for accepting the premises as true?). If it is invalid, say

why it is invalid. If the argument is not sound or it has a controversial premise, point out the weakest premise and criticize it (present some objection to it). Be sure to specify which premise you are criticizing.

A Couple More Pointers

What is wanted from a philosophy paper is not quite the same as what is (typically) wanted from a paper for other humanities subjects like History or English. Try to think of an essay in philosophy as more akin to a scientific report than a literary essay -- it should be as objective and uncluttered as possible, and as clear, precise and well organized as you can manage. A good model to bear in mind is that of a civil servant's report or briefing to her superiors. Imagine you are a civil servant whose task is to brief some not-too-bright superiors on the rights and wrongs of an issue. The superiors do not want to appear foolish, so they must show that they are on top of the issue. So your briefing should not overlook any angles. They do not want flowers and bells, but they want the basic structure, and they want to know what is at the heart of the issue, and the strength and weaknesses of the cases that can be made. They want an objective, clinical look.

Here are a couple of things to bear in mind:

(1) Since writing philosophy is all about reconstructing and critically examining (often fairly complex) arguments, it is particularly important to think carefully about the *structure* and *clarity* of your paper. The issues under discussion will typically be difficult enough to unravel without the added confusion of poor layout and unclear writing. SO: *Try to make your paper as systematic and well organized as possible.*

(2) Philosophical confusions often arise from the imprecise or ambiguous use of language, so keep your writing as clear and accurate as possible. Since clarity is so important to a careful examination of the argument at hand, be sure to avoid unnecessarily flowery or poetic writing. Beware verbosity and pretentious pseudo-philosophical wordplay! Try to say what you mean as directly and straightforwardly as possible. And always go back over what you have written to try to clarify any areas that seem confusingly written or ambiguous. SO: *Keep your writing style as simple and clear as possible.*

(3) It is important that you stay on topic. If the instructor wants the student to examine a particular argument then they want them to stick to an analysis of *that* argument -- rather than wandering off into discussions on other arguments and issues that aren't clearly related to the question at hand. Nor do they want the student to waste valuable space on windy rhetoric: grandiose introductions like *"this profound and weighty issue, which has vexed the greatest minds since time immemorial and which still challenges us all in these changing times today"* are just lame, so please leave them out of your paper. Instead, just cut to the chase, and follow the prompt. SO: *Keep your paper on the point and avoid what is irrelevant and distracting from the precise issue under discussion.*

(4) Contrary to the dogmas of certain prudish high school teachers, in writing a philosophy paper it is perfectly okay to use the first person ("*I think that...*") when setting out your own opinions. (If you want to. It's up to you.)

(5) Finally, note that the course web site <http://www.philosophy.ucsb.edu/websites/phil20A/> also has a link to a very helpful site offering 'Guidelines on Writing Philosophy Papers'.